

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 18, 2013

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We appreciate your recognition last week that the regime of Bashar al-Assad has used chemical weapons on numerous occasions in Syria, and we fully agree with you that the crossing of your red line must affect our calculations in Syria. We are concerned that conditions on the ground are deteriorating rapidly and significantly, and we write to urge you to take specific steps to change the military balance of power in Syria against the Assad regime and its foreign supporters.

The conflict in Syria has reached a critical juncture. The United Nations reported last week that the death toll in Syria is approaching 93,000. Assad's foreign allies are doubling down on him. According to recent published reports, the Iranian regime is increasing its already significant military and other assistance to Assad's forces, and the Russian government continues to provide arms and diplomatic support. It has also been reported that Hezbollah fighters have invaded the country by the thousands, and that Iranian-backed militants from Iraq are flowing into Syria in large numbers to support Assad. At the same time, Assad is aggressively employing every weapon in his arsenal—from tanks and artillery, to helicopter gunships and fighter aircraft, to chemical weapons. Indeed, it was reported last week that in May alone, Assad's forces carried out at least 500 air-to-ground attacks on civilians and opposition forces and flew several hundred transport flights to move Hezbollah and Syrian regime fighters around the battlefield.

As a result of this aggressive campaign with foreign support, Assad's forces are regaining the upper hand on the ground in Syria. The strategically important city of Qusayr has fallen, and thousands of Hezbollah fighters are reportedly leading the siege of Aleppo, the largest city in the country. Moderate opposition groups that the United States is supporting in Syria are in retreat in key areas of the country and are desperate for greater military assistance.

If Assad continues to turn the tide in this conflict, the consequences for U.S. national security interests would be disastrous. An Assad victory would dramatically increase the flow of refugees into Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, which are already straining under the current demand. It could further radicalize the Syrian opposition and enhance the growing influence of al-Qaeda affiliated groups inside Syria. It could push the Middle East, especially Iraq and Lebanon, deeper toward the prospect of sectarian conflict. It would be a major victory for the Iranian regime and its proxy forces that would expand their extremist influence in the region. And it would make it increasingly impossible to achieve a negotiated settlement that removes Assad from power and ends the violence and the conflict. After all, Assad and his foreign allies are unlikely to engage in a serious effort to end the conflict diplomatically when they think they are succeeding militarily.

For all of these reasons, the United States must take more decisive military actions in Syria to change the balance of power on the ground against Assad. Last month, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee voted, with an overwhelming bipartisan majority, to authorize robust lethal assistance to vetted opposition units in Syria. We urge you to take this essential step.

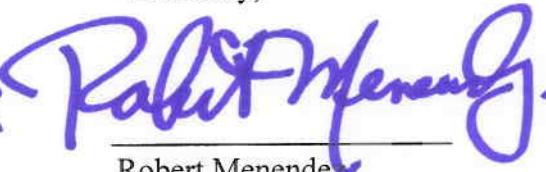
At the same time, the conflict in Syria is deteriorating so dramatically that providing arms to the opposition alone is unlikely to shift the military balance of power against Assad. We must also degrade Assad's ability to use air power and ballistic missiles against civilian populations and opposition forces in Syria. Such actions could include the targeting of regime airfields, runways, and aircraft on the ground, which would also limit Assad's ability to transport and resupply his ground forces and those of his allies by air. Finally, as part of this military effort, we encourage you to take steps to support the Syrian political and military opposition in creating and defending safe zones inside Syria where they can better organize and unify their efforts.

There is growing bipartisan support in the Congress for more robust actions to create the military conditions in Syria for a favorable negotiated resolution to the conflict. It is not too late for the United States to help achieve that critical goal, but we must act now. Greater U.S. leadership is the only force that can make a meaningful difference in Syria and secure the U.S. national security interests and values that are at stake in this conflict. If you lead our country and rally our friends and allies in the world to achieve these worthy goals, you will have our full support.

Sincerely,



John McCain
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Carl Levin
United States Senator